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ABSTRACT

This study sought to answer the questions: (1) Is there a shared perception among colleges, schools, and parents that there are special needs affecting the learning of single-parented students? If so, what are these needs? and (2) Is there a shared perception among colleges and schools as to how well teacher training programs are meeting the needs of these students? The study was intended to provide a multidimensional picture of the current teacher training efforts in this area as well as to provide data upon which to make recommendations. Three surveys were developed, one for each of the targeted populations: college chairpersons and coordinators involved with teacher training; elementary, middle/junior high school, and high school principals; and single parents of school-age children and teens. The surveys were mailed to targeted populations on Long Island, New York. Findings showed that teacher trainers, especially in regular education, as well as single parents, believe that single-parented students have special needs that affect their learning in school, and these two populations described a variety of these specific needs. In contrast, only 50 percent of school principals responded that single-parented children have special needs that affect their learning. Use of the term "special needs" in the surveys may have influenced this finding. There appears to be a clear perception by teacher trainers and school principals that teacher training programs are not preparing prospective teachers to meet the needs of single-parented students. Also, single parents, by rating 27 percent of their children's teachers as "needing improvement" in this regard, provide additional evidence to support a recommendation for improved effort by teacher trainers. (Contains 49 references.) (EV)

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THE SPECIAL NEEDS OF SINGLE-PARENTED STUDENTS

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THE SPECIAL NEEDS OF SINGLE-PARENTED STUDENTS

The year 2000 is fast approaching as the year that marks the decade of the single-parented child. In 1989, 22% of all children lived in single-parented families; only 11% did so in 1970 (U.S. Department of Education). Recent projections suggest that 50% of our school-age population will spend some portion of their lives being raised by only one parent. Given the problematic implications of this single parenting, America's social fabric will be greatly tested as society attempts to accommodate an immense at-risk population. There exists a sizable consensus at both the national and international level concerning the educational, social and psychological consequences produced by single-parented households.

As a result, the schools of our nation are faced with the significant task of meeting the educational, social, and psychological needs of this population of children and teenagers at a time when school district budgets are under great constraint. Clearly, school districts are looking to our college and university teacher-training programs to prepare teachers with knowledge, skills, and attitudes which will allow teachers to work successfully with single-parented students. In addition, experienced teachers, returning for additional certification or Master's degrees in their specialization, are also expected to return to the classroom better equipped to serve this at-risk population.

As a result, we thought it important to design a research study that would help to answer two questions in two major areas regarding single-parented students:

1. Is there a shared perception (college/schools/parents) that there are special needs

affecting the learning of single-parented students? If so, what are these needs?

2. Is there a shared perception (college/schools) as to how well teacher-training programs are meeting the needs of these students?

While single parents have been surveyed (Clay, 1981), regarding the performance of public schools in educating their children, our review of the education and psychology literature documents that no research has attempted to survey teacher-training programs nor school district administrators. This study was intended to provide a multidimensional picture of the current teacher-training efforts in this area as well as to provide data upon which to make recommendations, where appropriate.

METHODOLOGY

Three surveys were developed, one for each of the targeted populations: college chairpersons and coordinators involved with teacher-training; elementary, middle/junior high school, and high school principals; and single parents of school-age children and teens. The surveys were first piloted to a random sample representing each of the above three groups.

The surveys were then mailed to the targeted populations on Long Island, New York (Nassau and Suffolk Counties). Long Island was chosen for several important reasons. With a population of almost three million people, it also has a large single parent population (about 13%). Also, its schools are often recognized as being some of the very best secondary schools in the country, with many of them having received National School of Excellence Awards from the United States Education Department. These schools employ veteran, well-trained teachers and administrators. In addition, we had a database of over 100 single-parented students who were attending these schools. Finally, there

are several major four-year colleges and universities concentrated in this geographical area, all with teacher-training programs which have provided many teachers for Long Island schools.

Surveys were mailed to 32 chairpersons or coordinators at nine teacher-training programs, to 113 school principals, about equally divided between elementary, middle/junior, and senior high schools, and to 130 single-parents of school-age children.

Usable response were received from nine college chairpersons or coordinators, 24 school principals, and 16 parents.

RESULTS

1. Is there a shared perception that there are special needs affecting the learning of single-parented students?

A pattern emerges whereby chairpersons and coordinators (66%) in teacher-training programs as well as single parents (75%) do perceive there to be special needs affecting the learning of single-parented students, while school principals are divided regarding this conclusion (Table 1). There were 14 special needs cited by college chairpersons and coordinators, with none cited from secondary education (Table 2).

College faculty working in "regular" education, i.e., early childhood, elementary, secondary, all viewed these students as having special needs which affect their learning. Faculty working in Special Education were divided in their responses.

School principals cited 25 special needs (Table 3). When they were asked if there were special needs which were "most important" in terms of learning, their emphasis diverged according to school level. At the elementary

level, respondents cited "Positive teacher-student rapport" and "Distractions in school which are related to family issues." At the middle school level, respondents cited "Emotional support," "Time to adjust and recover emotionally," "Teach-ing appropriate social skills," and Parent participation in student's education." At the high school level, respondents cited "Support." One respondent, who didn't indicate school level, cited "Supervision of Homework" as most important.

2. Is there a shared perception as to how well teacher-training programs are meeting the needs of single-parent students ?

Of a total of 19 respondents who provided an effectiveness rating, there were 58% who indicated a need for improvement, with almost half of these being high school principals. Only 10% of the respondents indicated that teacher-training programs are doing an excellent job in meeting the needs of single-parented students (Table 4).

When chairpersons and coordinators were asked to rate faculty effectiveness in preparing their prospective teachers to address the special needs of single-parented students, only one respondent (special education) rated the faculty "Excellent." Two respondents rated their faculty's effectiveness as "Could be improved" (secondary education and special education).

When school principals were asked to rate effectiveness, only one principal provided an "Excellent" rating. Twenty-eight percent provided a "Good" rating. "Could be improved" was the rating provided by almost 65% of the principals, with all except one respondent principal coming from a middle or senior high school.

When parents were asked to rate their children's teachers' performance in addressing special needs, 20% rate

teachers as "Needs Improvement." No parents rated any secondary teacher as "Excellent."

Five respondents representing three different teacher-training institutions offered suggestions to improve their program's effectiveness. One special education coordinator suggested that prospective teachers be introduced, early in the program, to different family configurations. An early childhood coordinator suggested more contact with single-parents. The elementary education coordinator suggested that students do their fieldwork or student teaching in school districts well populated with single-parented students who were benefitting from their school programs. A second special education chairperson suggested that the work of adjunct instructors be reviewed in order to ensure the inclusion of this curricula topic. A coordinator of secondary education suggested that the student teaching seminar include strategies regarding working with single-parented students.

Principals of elementary schools suggested additional after school help as well as parenting groups which focused on parenting skills and stress management. Middle school principals suggested that teachers be constantly reminded to "hone in" on those special needs, that teachers need to be more sensitive and supportive, and that appropriate staff be located and appointed to address these special needs.

Principals of elementary schools suggested that college programs should include the teaching about and understanding of family dynamics, while providing for more realistic solutions in addressing these special needs. Middle school principals suggested that college programs need to be more knowledge based concerning current school practices. In this regard, they suggested that practicing teachers and administrators should speak to prospective teachers at the college level. Middle school administrators also suggested that prospective teachers learn more about the processes children go through when adjusting to divorce. High school

principals suggested that counseling be part of the teacher-training program and that mandated courses be taken by prospective teachers which would acquaint them with various behavioral/emotional issues in today's schools. Some administrators urged, for example, that a deeper understanding and heightened sensitivity to teen pregnancy issues in the single-parented population be incorporated into prospective teacher-training programs. High school principals also encouraged an exploration of the Comer School Development Program as well as encouraging an integrated approach to teacher training that "truly examines what it means to be a teacher."

DISCUSSION

Teacher trainers, especially in regular education, as well as parents of single-parented children, believe that single-parented students have special needs which affect their learning in school, and these two populations described a variety of these specific needs. In contrast, only 50% of the respondents who are school principals believe that this single-parented population has special needs that affect their learning. The researchers were at first puzzled by this apparent inconsistency with the other two target populations, i.e., teacher-trainers and single parents. However, upon analysis, we believe the term used in this study,'special needs', may have been responsible for this inconsistency.

While 24 school principals, representing 20% of this surveyed target population did respond, the researchers agreed that the rate of respondent return would have been much greater had the study not used the term 'special needs'. This term is most often associated with special education students, and more specifically with Public Law 94-142, (*The Education of All Handicapped Students Act of 1975*), which describes a variety of disabling conditions

that enable students classified under the act to receive special educational services. School principals may have been reluctant to respond to a survey that they may have perceived to be a mechanism for providing evidence for the consideration of single-parented students for costly special education services. This may also help to explain the divided response from school principals as to whether they perceive single-parented students as having special needs which affect their learning.

As further confirmation regarding the possible confusion surrounding the use of the term 'special needs', we noted that teacher-trainers working in special education were also equally divided in their responses. As part of their training and practice, this group uses the 'special needs' term with student populations clearly delineated by law and established classification criteria, i.e., emotionally impaired, learning disabled, etc.

There appears to be a clear perception by teacher-trainers and school principals that teacher-training programs are not preparing prospective teachers to meet the needs of single-parented students. Also, single parents, by rating 27% of their children's teachers as "Needing improvement" regarding this, provides additional evidence to support a recommendation regarding the need for improved effort needed by teacher-trainers. Of special note is the nearly universal evaluation by middle and senior school principals regarding the poor performance by teacher trainers in preparing prospective teachers to meet the learning needs of single-parented students.

This clear level of dissatisfaction may be easily understood when one considers that not a single secondary educator in teacher-training returned our survey. One implication could be that this is a topic that is absent from their curricula. This may be the case for two reasons. The first is that the belief system of the college professor working as a teacher-trainer is similar to that of most

college professors, with their focus on the teaching of subject matter or a discipline and not students. This conclusion is confirmed by the comments and recommendations of secondary school principals urging a reconsideration of teacher-training for secondary teachers in order to heighten their sensitivity to individual student needs as well as to consider the "whole" student.

A second implication is that the materials used by teacher-trainers are simply inadequate in dealing with this topic. It is our experience that texts used in the psychological foundations of education, another logical curricula placement of this topic, appear to focus more often - and briefly - only on those children who are single-parented from divorce, thus ignoring those students who are single-parented as a result of parental death, desertion, imprisonment, or the large and increasing numbers from out-of-wedlock births, especially within the Black-American and Hispanic-American communities(*Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1996*,p. 78).

Table 1
Do Single-Parented Students Have Special Needs Which Affect Their Learning?

	Yes	No
College chairpersons/coordinators	6	3
School principals	9	11
Single parents`	12	4

Table 2

Special Needs of Single-Parented Students Cited By Teacher-Trainers

Early Childhood Education
Attachments to mother and/or father
Child care
Developmental needs (expectations, guidance)
Support systems (mentoring)
Elementary Education
Sensitivity to the culture of each person, including family constellation
Socio-economic status
Limited time with parent
Cultural/societal view of the family unit
Special Education
Counseling
Information re: different family structures
More instruction for work to be completed at home
Fewer demands place on children re: homework (particularly early elementary)
Servicing the student/family at each school level
Dealing with mild to severe or profound disabilities
Secondary Education
* None

* The one respondent with secondary education as a specialization, while acknowledging that single-parented

students do have special needs, did not cite any specific needs.

Table 3

Special Needs Cited By Building Principals

Elementary
Positive student-teacher rapport
Adjustments and disruption of daily life routines
Distractions in school which are related to family issues
Middle School/Junior High
Emotional support
After school supervision and care (help with organization, homework, and study)
Assistance in connecting both parents and the school
Education regarding pregnancy and parenting
Teachers need to be aware/provide information
Academic support/extra help
Understanding/recognition of feelings
Time to adjust and recover emotionally
Individual and family counseling
Teaching social development skills
Parent able to visit school and participate and support student's education
Adequate self-image
Senior High School
Emotional support
After school supervision and care (help with organization, homework, and study
Support

Table 3 (Continued)

Special Needs Cited By Building Principals

Discipline (consistent; structure)
Concrete services
Adaptive program
Education regarding pregnancy and parenting
Intervention/advocacy
Senior High School (Continued)
Parent able to visit the school and participate and support student's education
Good work habits have not been established/nurtured
School Level Not Indicated
After school supervision and care (help with organization, homework, and study)
Teachers need to be aware/provided information
Individual and family counseling
Group counseling
Clear communication with parents
More contact with parents by counselors

Table 4

Is There a Shared Perception As To How Well Teacher-Training Programs Are Meeting The Special Needs of Single-Parented Students?

	Excellent	Good	Could Be Improved
College chairpersons/ coordinators	1	2	2
School principals	1	4	9

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